

"VALMERE" (VAIL HOUSE)
501 New Market Street
New Market
Middlesex County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-727

HABS

NJ

12-NEWM

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

"VALMERE (VAIL HOUSE)

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Location: 501 New Market Street, between Stilton Road and
Van Wyckle Lane, New Market, originally
Quibbletown, Middlesex County, New Jersey

Present Owner Our Lady of Fatima Roman Catholic Church
and Occupant:

Present Use: Rectory

Brief Statement This Greek Revival frame house was the home of
of Significance: Eliza Vail, daughter of Duncan Phyfe.

PART I HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Valmere (meaning Vail on the water) is named for the family that owned the house for three generations. The house was built for William Vail, Sr., and inherited by his grandson, Frederick Percy Vail in 1901. The house was later owned by a Major Van Winkle; present owner, Our Lady of Fatima Roman Catholic Church.
2. Date of erection: Built between 1849 and 1851
3. Notes on alterations and additions Exterior in fair condition but repaired; interior in fair condition but altered.

- B. Supplemental material: My great grand-father, William Vail, son of William Vail and Jemima Coles, his wife, bought one half a "plantation" from his father and first lived, with his wife, in the pre-revolutionary cottage on the place (see records in County Records Building, Bayard St., New Brunswick, N. J.).

William Vail was an enterprising man and made a considerable fortune in the village of New Market (population approximately 500). He had an oakum factory, a grist mill, and a general store. When he grew more prosperous he built Valmere and moved into it.

Duncan Phyfe, his father-in-law, never lived at Valmere, never worked at his trade of designing and cabinet making there.

A recent owner, Major Van Winkle, began the stories that Duncan Phyfe designed and built the house as a wedding

present for his daughter, Eliza; which, if true, would be embarrassing, as all her children were born before 1849 when the house was built.

Major Van Winkle's reason for circulating these stories was, I assume, to lend to Valmere historical interest and enhance its value. Duncan Phyfe may have visited his daughter and son-in-law at Valmere (I have no documentary evidence) but he never lived there.

The small building which the Major said was Duncan Phyfe's work shop was the house in which the hired man slept, until my father, Frederick Percy Vail, inherited Valmere in 1901 and moved there to live. Because my father employed a gardener, who came by the day, he converted the one-room building into a carpenter shop.

My father was a good mechanic and often "did over" antique furniture which he bought at country auctions. Major Van Winkle said he found mahogany shavings tucked in the eaves of this shop, that he submitted them to an expert on wood-working who said they could only have been shaved by a master craftsman; ergo, Duncan Phyfe shaved them! The truth is my father stuffed them there to close a small crack under the eaves.

Duncan Phyfe was born in Inverness, Scotland, the son of a sheepherder. After the death of his father, his mother, who must have been a courageous woman, gathered her children and somehow got together enough money to bring them to the New World, where she thought they all had a better chance of making their fortunes. Duncan was eighteen at the time. He was apprenticed to a "joiner" in Albany, learned his trade and then moved to New York, N. Y., where he thought his chances to conduct a successful trade were greater. Thereafter, he lived and died in New York. His home, show-room and work shop were on the site of the present Hudson Terminal, then called Partition St. See: Nancy McClelland, Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency, 1795-1830 (New York: W. R. Scott, Inc., /c. 1939/); Charles Over Cornelius, Furniture Masterpieces of Duncan Phyfe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1922).

For sketch of Valmere see: New Historical Atlas of Middlesex County, New Jersey (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1876).

The driveways and paths at Valmere were once all lined with box.

The drawing room at the left on the main floor was once two rooms. The front half-basement room was originally the dining-room, the room behind it was the kitchen. The pantry on the main floor was originally an open area at the head of the stairs. Frederick Percy Vail had the area enclosed

to make a pantry and put in a dumb-waiter from the original dining room, which he used as a kitchen.

The "clothes closet" on the first bedroom floor, now divided to make a kitchen and another room, was originally one large closet.

The bath on this above mentioned floor was originally a small room with no exit to the hall. The door leading to the hall was cut by my father's order.

(Signed) Virginia Howell, nee Vail

Prepared by Virginia Howell, nee Vail
(Mrs. J. Bertram Howell)
Great Granddaughter of William Vail
January 1960

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a Greek Revival, frame house with a tall Doric porch.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. The exterior is kept in repair, the interior has been altered.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. General description: The enclosed part of the building is nearly square, two and one half stories high. A front porch, the full width of the building extends the west side, with four two-story high Doric columns supporting an unusually tall Doric entablature which masks the third or attic story. The architrave is pierced with five relatively small windows on the front, three windows on each side, and five across the back to light the third floor. There is a returned pilaster at each of the four corners of the building. The entire building, from the watertable up, is wood, including the columns and ornament. The roof is flat.
2. Foundations: The foundation walls, about four feet above grade, are of dressed brownstone, with windows to light the cellar. Foundations and steps with wrought-iron railings are apparently later work. The porch, which has a wooden floor, has no railing.
3. Wall Construction: The walls are narrowly spaced wood clapboards.
4. Openings: The main entrance door has side-lights and

transom, recessed in a frame of flat pediment and pilasters.

In general, the windows of the first and second floors are large, double-hung, wood sash, six light over six light set in simple frames with flat pedimented heads. The center window of the second floor front over the main entrance is a six light over six light double hung window with side-lights. The four first floor front windows, two on each side of the main entrance, are double hung nine light over nine light, and extend to the floor. The side elevations have three windows on each of the three floors, evenly spaced and vertically aligned.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plan: A Central hall extends from the front to the rear of the building flanked by two rooms on each side. On the right or south side, the two rooms are separated by a stair hall. The stairway has large heavy balusters, hand rail, and newel post. The front and back parlors on the left, or north side are joined by an elliptically arched opening, trimmed in wood. This opening has been recently filled in, and the center has been partitioned to form front and back halls.
2. Trim: Trim on first floor doors and windows is in a Greek Revival style. The library, or front room on the right, is lined with book shelves, broken or stepped to leave spaces for statuary.
3. Mantels: Greek Revival mantels of black marble.
4. Hardware: Some door knobs and escutcheons match the Greek Revival trim.
5. Lighting fixtures: All modern electric.

- D. Site: The building faces west on a large open lawn with trees and shrubs.

Prepared by George Brokaw Howell
Architect, Rutgers University (ret.)
New Brunswick, New Jersey
December 1960